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I tried real  
hard to do this.  
I tried real hard  
to make it last.  
But ~~you~~ you can't  
move on to the  
future if you  
can't let go of  
the past.  
I kept on &  
Dena that you  
cared  
but the days  
you real cold  
and lonely  
and you're  
with someone  
and I still have one

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# The Influence of Zoroastrianism on Christian Eschatology

**By JENNIFER CHEEK**

**Gardner-Webb University  
North Carolina Zeta  
Boiling Springs, North Carolina**



*Jennifer Cheek is an Alfred H. Nolle Scholar alternate for 2008-09.*

Countless societies, cultures and religions have attempted to explain and understand death, dying, and the afterlife. A review of the wide range of eschatological explanations for these “last things” in life, clear similarities and connections between certain religions emerge. This essay will deal with one such connection—the connection between Zoroastrian eschatology and Christian eschatology. Although Judaism and Christianity are two separate religions, it would be foolish to analyze the development of Christian thought without also taking into account the fact that Christianity grew out of Judaism. Therefore, this essay will deal not only with how Zoroastrianism influenced Christian beliefs about the afterlife but also with the role of Jewish eschatology in shaping modern Christian beliefs about death and dying.

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the world. Founded by Zoroaster (also called Zarathustra) in present-day Iran more than 3500 years ago, it was the official religion of the Persian Empire from 600 BCE to 650 CE, making it one of the most powerful religions in the world during that period (“Religion & Ethics”). It is relatively unheard of today, as it has only about 250,000 followers in the world, with the majority living in India and Iran. Zoroastrians believe in one God called Ahura Mazda, or

“Wise Lord,” who created the world and revealed his truth through the prophet Zoroaster. They also believe in the hostile spirit Angra Mainyu, who, though not the equal of Ahura Mazda, exists in opposition to the Holy Spirit of Ahura Mazda, Spenta Mainyu. The exact relationship between Ahura Mazda and Spenta Mainyu is hard to determine from Zoroastrian sacred texts, but Spenta Mainyu is best described as “a divine attribute of Ahura Mazda” (Nigosian 74). Therefore, the cosmic dualism of Zoroastrianism is not that of two equal Gods, one good and one evil, but of one all-powerful God whose creative energy, Spenta Mainyu, is opposed by a destructive energy, Angra Mainyu, much like the Holy Spirit and Satan in Christianity (“Religion & Ethics”).

The influence of Zoroastrian eschatology on Christian eschatology began long before the time of Christ with the faith that Christianity sprang from—Judaism, and specifically, pre-exilic Judaism. Like all other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, the ancient Israelites held beliefs about what happened to the body and the soul once a person died. Most Ancient Near Eastern groups, such as the Mesopotamians, Ugarits, and Egyptians, held detailed beliefs about individual eschatology, giving descriptions of the soul’s descent to the underworld in works such as the Gilgamesh epic, *The Descent of Ishtar*, and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. As scholar Philip Johnston notes, these societies were very concerned with life after death, and it showed in their literature (69).

Israel’s literature, however, stands in stark contrast to the afterlife-preoccupied writings of other Ancient Near Eastern groups; there is no description of descent to or ascent from the underworld in the Hebrew Bible, nor is there a detailed description of the underworld itself. Johnston says that although the Hebrew root word for death is used more than one thousand times in the Hebrew Scriptures, the underworld is only referenced about one hundred times, making it a very minor Old Testament theme. He adds that the most frequently used Hebrew word for the underworld, “Sheol,” is used sixty-six times in the Old Testament, and even in these instances, exact and consistent descriptions of the purpose of Sheol and its inhabitants are not found. When Sheol is described in the Old Testament, it is generally said to be a dark place, and its inhabitants are inactive and silent (Johnston 69-76).

Determining the concept of Sheol and its inhabitants is difficult since many passages are contradictory. Johnston discusses some of these conflicting concepts. One common understanding among Christians is that Sheol is synonymous with Hell or Hades, as it is translated in the King James Bible. This belief, however, is incorrect in that it ignores the fact that the Old Testament never describes Sheol as a place of punishment, as Hell is described in the New Testament. In fact, several prominent and respected Old Testament figures such as Jacob, Job, Hezekiah, and one of the Psalmists anticipate going to Sheol (Johnston 73, 81). Another view of the afterlife says that Sheol is “a common fate of all the dead” and is a dark and gloomy place (Bauckham 14). This belief is also problematic, as for the most part the righteous people in the Old Testament do not speak about going to Sheol after they die, or anywhere for that matter. Yet another view of Sheol is that it means “grave” when referring to the righteous and “underworld” when referring to the wicked because it is doctrinally incorrect for the good and the bad to have the same afterlife destiny. Johnston says that just like the other interpretations, this argument is problematic because it ignores Biblical passages where inhabitants of Sheol speak, like Isaiah 14:10 and Ezekiel 32:21, and passages in which different definitions of “Sheol” would be required within the same passage, such as Isaiah 14:11-15. Another attempt to explain the meaning of “Sheol”

says that the term always means “grave.” This definition does not work either. Texts such as Deuteronomy 32:22 require the translation “realm of death” as opposed to “realm of the grave” (Johnston 73-75).

Given the many conflicting representations of Sheol, how can one understand the Jewish view of the afterlife? As in any society and religion, the writers of the Old Testament probably had different understandings of the tenets of their faith and represented different groups within Judaism. Therefore, it makes sense that they would describe Sheol in different ways. The great majority of Old Testament references to Sheol describe it as a place for

[S]heol is never used in the Old Testament in connection with someone who is dying after a happy and fulfilled life.

the wicked. In the few instances when the name is used in connection with a righteous person or as a generic destination for all people, either the person faces an unhappy or untimely death and interprets it as punishment from God, or life is described as wicked or meaningless. The word is never used in the Old Testament in connection with someone who is

dying after a happy and fulfilled life (Johnston 81-82). This overview of usage leaves us in an interesting position concerning Jewish views of the afterlife. If most Jews believed that Sheol was a place for the wicked, then the pre-exilic Israelites show no evidence of having a concept of an afterlife for those who were righteous, or at least they did not focus on it enough to merit mention in their Scriptures.

The Old Testament continues to support this view of the afterlife up until the time of the Exilic and Post-Exilic periods. The Exilic period began in 587 BCE, when the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem were forced to migrate from their native homes to Babylon after their defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. It is possible that during this time the Israelites first came into contact with Zoroastrianism (Nigosian 96), though some scholars disagree with this conjecture. For example, Mary Boyce says that Zoroastrianism did not “enter history” until the time of the Persian Empire during the Post-Exilic era (1171). Whether the Jews were first introduced to Zoroastrianism during the time of Babylonian captivity or during the height of the Persian Empire, evidence suggests that the majority of Zoroastrian influence occurred during the reign of Persia in the Post-exilic period (Kriwaczek 195).

Darius, the king of Persia from 522-486 BCE and well-known character in the Bible, is believed to have been a devout follower of Zoroastrianism (Tullock 310). An inscription cut into the side of a cliff above one of the main roads of the Persian Empire and next to a depiction of Darius's victories while king states: “Ahura Mazda bestowed the kingdom upon me; Ahura Mazda bore me aid until I took possession of the kingdom; by the favour of Ahura Mazda I hold the kingdom” (Kriwaczek 186). Darius's clear tribute to Ahura Mazda shows the hold that Zoroastrianism had on the Persian Empire during the Jews' captivity.

King Cyrus was also likely a follower of Zoroastrianism, given the Zoroastrian symbols found on his tomb (Kriwaczek 175).

Had the Jews been severely oppressed by the Persians, they would likely have rebelled as they did against the Egyptians, and they would have strengthened their resolve against other religions. However, the Jewish people had a very friendly, intimate connection with the Persian leaders. Biblical figures such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Mordecai were important members of the Persian court, and Esther even became the queen of Ahasuerus, the king of the Persian Empire. Paul Kriwaczek remarks that given these close relations, it would have been surprising if some Zoroastrian theology, and specifically eschatological theology, had not found its way into the Jewish mindset (195).

During this time of close Persian-Jewish relations, Kriwaczek continues, ideas that had been “noticeably absent” from Pre-Exilic Old Testament books started to become part of the mainstream Jewish religion: “life after death, resurrection, eternal reward and punishment, and the existence of Heaven, imagined as a garden” (197). Concerning the afterlife, Zoroastrians believed that on the third day after a person’s death, the soul departed from the body and ascended to a sacred mountain where good and bad deeds were weighed (Johnston 234). If good dominated, then the soul would be able to cross the Chinvat bridge into heaven, or paradise. If bad dominated, then the soul would plunge into the underworld, the “place of worst existence” for punishment (Boyce 1170). At the end of time, there would be a bodily resurrection of all people and a second and final judgment. Those who were judged to be good in this final judgment would move on to “eternal bliss on a restored earth” while those who were judged to be wicked would perish completely (Johnston 234).

Comparing this version of death, dying, and the end times to what is found in the Old Testament reveals almost no similarities between the Jewish concept of Sheol and the Zoroastrian concept of paradise, punishment, and a final judgment. However, anyone familiar with Christian beliefs about the afterlife and end times can see that Zoroastrian eschatology is similar to Christian eschatology. This is curious since half of Christianity’s sacred literature is also Judaism’s sacred literature. In most Protestant Christian beliefs, the soul departs from the body immediately after death and goes either to heaven or hell. The soul goes to heaven if the person has experienced salvation through Jesus Christ, making him/her righteous and therefore able to enter the realm of Heaven. The person who is not saved, however, is still in a wicked state, and therefore the soul departs to hell. Some Christian groups also believe that after the time of tribulation, the known world will come to an end, followed by a resurrection of all people and a second judgment. At the second judgment, the Devil, his demons, and all the wicked will be cast in the lake of fire while the righteous will be with Christ for the millennial reign on the new earth.

The majority of the Old Testament has nothing resembling either Zoroastrian or Christian eschatology at all. However, in some of the later prophetic literature and in the intertestamental books, which consist of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, a few similar ideas begin to appear. Kriwaczek notes that in the book of Job, the figure of Satan, from the Hebrew *Ha-Satan*, meaning “the adversary,” first appears, paralleling the evil force in Zoroastrianism, Angra Mainyu, mentioned in the brief summary of Zoroastrianism at the beginning of this paper (197). Satan is the same figure who later becomes the ruler of hell in Christian eschatology. Johnston says that in the book of Daniel, in addition to referencing the concept of Satan, the author speaks of the dead awakening to arise from the dust of the

earth and a final judgment, ideas similar to those of the resurrection and final judgment seen in Zoroastrianism (224).

Lloyd Applegate concludes that while Zoroastrian eschatology made some impact on Jewish views of Satan and the resurrection, Christianity latched on to many more Zoroastrian ideas (5). Both Christians and Zoroastrians believe that a person's deeds on earth will determine his/her placement in the afterlife. In Zoroastrianism, S. A. Nigosian says, the righteous enter paradise at death, which is described as a place of "beauty, light, pleasant scent, and bliss,"

**Both Christians and Zoroastrians believe that a person's deeds on earth will determine his/her placement in the afterlife.**

an idea very similar to the Christian idea of heaven. The wicked are sent to the underworld, which is full of "horror, misery, darkness, evil smells, and suffering," much like the hell of Christian eschatology (92). As noted above, Zoroastrianism is also congruent with Christianity in its belief in a single, all-powerful God with an evil spirit that opposes God. Both

Christians and Zoroastrians believe that at the end of time there will be a bodily resurrection and a second and final judgment that will send righteous souls to live for eternity in a restored and perfected earth (Johnston 234). Finally, both Christians and Zoroastrians believe in a world savior, born in a miraculous virgin birth (Boyce 1171).

While it seems that Zoroastrian-influenced Jewish scriptures had some impact on the Zoroastrian ideals in Christianity, the Old Testament could not have been the only way in which Zoroastrianism was introduced into Christianity. Zoroastrianism must have been a strong part of the culture, a theory that history and archaeology support. One indication that Zoroastrianism made an impact on Christianity is in one of the first and most important accounts of Christianity: the birth of Jesus. Boyce argues that the Magi who were said to have come to worship Jesus and bring him gifts were likely Zoroastrian priests, a group that would follow Persian rulers, soldiers, and settlers throughout the Ancient Near East (1171). However, many followers of Zoroastrianism saw their faith as unique to Iran, and therefore probably made few proselytistic efforts. If proselytization was not a significant part of Zoroastrian practices, then followers of this faith must have been more prominent in the time of the intertestamental period and the early Christian church than has been suggested in the past. In fact, scholars have found that Zoroastrianism was enthusiastically discussed in the Athenian Academy and that Zoroastrian dualism influenced the "struggle between the good and evil world-souls" in Plato's *Laws* (Dannenfeldt 7-8). Although past historians believed that Zoroastrianism was mostly confined to Iran after the reign of Alexander the Great, new evidence shows that the religion flourished under Greek rule until the rise of Islam in the 7th century (Boyce 1172). Given this information, Zoroastrianism no doubt had a great influence on Christian eschatology, as Zoroastrianism actually influenced the culture

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